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SIR JAMES WRIGHT

**Governor of Georgia by Royal Commission,
1760-1782**

By WILLIAM HARDEN

Before the surrender of the charter, the only Governor of Georgia acting under the Trustees was General James Oglethorpe; but for a period of nearly eight years, from July, 1743, to April, 1751, William Stephens, President of the Council, acted as Governor in the absence of Oglethorpe. The latter left the Colony in 1743, and never returned, but held the office until June 9, 1752, at which time he, with the other Trustees, turned the affairs over to Henry Parker, who, as President of Council and therefore acting Governor, held the reins of government from the time Stephens retired until October 1, 1754.

The Trustees resigned June 9, 1752, and then Georgia became a royal province with Parker in office, without commission, until John Reynolds, the first appointee under the crown, accepted the office October 1, 1754, and served until February 15, 1757, when he was succeeded by Henry Ellis. Ellis served three years and eight months, and delivered up the office to Sir James Wright, October 31, 1760, as Lieutenant Governor, by commission dated May 13.

If length of service be the only proof of satisfaction with the management of affairs by the appointee, then the subject of this sketch, by reason of his holding the office of Lieut. Governor for two years and Captain-General and Governor in Chief of the Province of Georgia for twenty years, thoroughly evinced his acceptability, first to King George II and afterwards to George III. His commission for this office was dated March 20, 1767. But Sir James Wright was no ordinary man, and his retention was based upon grounds of honor, integrity, worth, and the

possession of that high degree of executive ability which became more manifest as his tenure of office was prolonged. He was not all the time in a calm and contented state of mind, however, and often the cares and responsibilities of his position weighed heavily upon him, so much so that he repeatedly hinted in letters to his superiors that they were more than he had the patience to bear or judgment to surmount. Some times his words conveyed more than a hint, as when he said on the 10th of July, 1775, "I begin to think a King's Governor has little or no business here," and again, on the 18th of the same month, "I am humbly to request that his Majesty will be graciously pleased to give me leave to return to England in order to resign the government." But, despite all that, he was made to see that his services were estimably rated and that he was deemed worthy of the trust confided to his keeping, and he held on until the cause of the Americans was successful and the thirteen colonies lost to England.

It will appear from the foregoing remarks that there was but one English Governor in Georgia during the whole of the Revolutionary period; but on the side of the opposition there were no less than twelve men who, in the same length of time, held the office of chief executive, some for a very short term. At the outbreak of the troubles William Ewen was made President of the Council of Safety, and from June 22, 1775, to January 20, 1776, he was recognized as the leader of the patriots, the board which he presided over having practically all the powers that the opposition was willing to assume. Sir James Wright himself reported: "The Council of Safety seems to be the Executive Branch in each Colony, subject to Provincial Congress." Archibald Bulloch was made President of the Provincial Congress which met July 4, 1775, re-elected at the next Congress, June 20, 1776, and served until February 22, 1777, when he was clothed with extraordinary powers "to take upon himself the whole executive powers of government, calling to his assistance not less than five persons

of his own choosing to consult and advise with him on every urgent occasion when a sufficient number of councilors can not be convened to make a board," and he died before the end of the month. After him came Button Gwinnett who, as President of Council and Commander in Chief, held control until May 8, 1777, surrendering the trust to John Adam Treutlen at that time elected by the legislature. Treutlen's tenure was of short duration, lasting just eight months, John Houstoun succeeding him by election of the Assembly, January 10, 1778. On the 29th of December, 1778, Executive Council elected John Wreath with the title of President, and, in less than eleven months, on the 4th of November, 1779, he was succeeded by George Walton, who was Governor two months, giving way to his successor, Richard Howley, January 4, 1780. Mr. Howley's administration lasted one year, and Stephen Heard, as President of the Council, was chief executive from the end of Mr. Howley's term until August 16, 1781, retiring on the election of Nathan Brownson. Mr. Brownson became Governor in August, 1781, served six months, and his successor, John Martin, went into office the following January, 1782. Martin's term lasted a full year, and he was followed by Lyman Hall, in January, 1783. Governor Hall was the last of the Governors opposing the British rule, and when his term expired the independence of the United States was firmly established.

To those not acquainted with the ancestry of Sir James Wright, the subject is worthy of interest and consideration. His great-great-grandfather was Thomas Wright, of Kilverstone, England, whose wife's name we do not know. The third son of this gentleman was Jermyn Wright, of Wrangford in Suffolk, and he married Ann Bachcroft, this couple being the great-grandparents of Sir James. Next we have the name of Robert, son of Jermyn and Ann, who became Justice of the King's Bench, and presided at the trial of the seven Bishops in the time of James II. He married Susan, daughter of Matthew Wren, Bishop of Ely, and they were the grand-

parents of the subject of this sketch. Robert and Susan's son Robert, of Sedgfield, England, was the father of Sir James. His wife, Isabella, was also a Wright, married a Mr. Pitts, and as his widow married Robert Wright, and she was the mother of Sir James, who was their fourth son, born in Russell Street, Bloomsbury, May 8, 1716. The father and mother moved to South Carolina, of which Province he became Chief Justice, holding that office at the time of his death. The son, James, probably received his education in England, but on being admitted to the Bar pursued his profession in Charleston, afterwards receiving the appointment of agent of South Carolina in Great Britain. The statement made by a number of writers that Sir James Wright was a native of South Carolina is wrong. Investigation proves that the time and place of his birth as given above are correct.

We are not acquainted with the circumstances which brought about the appointment of the man to so high a position as Governor of a King's Province in America, but we do know that from the very beginning of his administration until it came to an end by the failure of Great Britain to retain her hold on her valuable possessions on this side of the Atlantic, he, notwithstanding his occasional letters of despondency and sometimes of despair, always had the backing and support due to one holding the highest esteem and trust of those to whom he was responsible for his acts.

Sir James Wright, after finishing his studies and receiving his license, began to practice his profession in Charleston, S. C. In 1740 he married Sarah, only daughter of Captain Maidman of the British Army, and on a voyage back to England, in 1763, she was drowned.

The first act of importance accomplished by the new Governor—and it was one of very great consequence—was his course in frustrating the attempt of Governor Thomas Boone, of South Carolina, to extend his jurisdiction over a portion of territory bordering on Florida, south of Georgia. Had the plan of Boone succeeded, South Carolina would have

acquired an extensive domain beyond her own limits with Georgia intervening. The story is too long to relate in this place, but the result was all that Governor Wright could desire. When informed of the intention of Boone to issue grants to land south of the Altamaha, Wright made a strong protest, addressed to Boone, "against all and any attempt whatsoever to survey any lands to the southward of the aforesaid river Altamaha, by pretence or color of any authority from or under the Governor or the Governor and Council of South Carolina." After much correspondence and diplomatic work, the difficulty was removed by the action of King George III who, by proclamation, dated October 7th, 1763, annexed to Georgia the territory included in the grants, extending the limits of the Province southwardly from the Altamaha to the St. Mary's river. That matter being settled, it became necessary to make known to the Indians the circumstances of the transaction, and to secure their friendship. On the advice of the King the Earl of Egmont, provincial Secretary of State for the Southern Department, proposed a convention of the various tribes, in order to obtain the desired results. Governor Wright suggested Augusta as the place of meeting, and the congress was held there on Saturday, November 5, 1763. The Governors of Georgia, North and South Carolina and the Lieutenant-Governor of Virginia, together with Mr. John Stuart, Superintendent of Indian Affairs, met at the time appointed, and had the satisfaction of finding the large number of seven hundred Indians present as an indication of their interest in the business which brought them together. Governor Wright opened the conference with a talk, and his influence upon the Indians resulted in much good to Georgia in particular.

Until the beginning of the troubles, starting with the Stamp Act, which forced him to side with the mother country, Sir James was most acceptable to the people of Georgia who recognized his worth and gave him credit for the ability which he so richly possessed. Of him Capt. Hugh McCall wrote: "The government had been given to a man who wanted neither

wisdom to discern nor resolution to pursue the most effectual means for its improvement * * * He proved a father to the people and governed the Province with equity and justice." With the passage of the Stamp Act, however, and the consequent change in the attitude of the colonies towards Great Britain, the Governor's conduct was not pleasing to the party protesting against his attempts to enforce the measures of oppression which he, as a loyal Briton, felt obliged to support. So complete was the change in his course of conduct that the words used by him in a letter to Secretary Conway, on the 31st of January, 1766, are a fair sample of his feeling brought about by the opposition to that oppression. He said: "It is with the utmost concern that I am to acquaint your Excellency that the same spirit of sedition, or rather rebellion, which first appeared at Boston has reached this Province, and I have for three months past been continually reasoning and talking with the most dispassionate and sensible people in order to convince them of the propriety of an acquiescence and submission to the King's authority * * * but, sir, I must at the same time declare that I have had the great mortification to see the reins of government nearly wrested out of my hands, his Majesty's authority insulted, and the civil power obstructed."

With the repeal of the measure causing the first excitement in the beginning of the struggle against British injustice, affairs in Georgia settled down to comparative quietness, and with the exception of some warm discussions with a number of the members of the Commons House of Assembly, and other persons, there was no matter of sufficient importance to specifically mention for a few years following. His conflict with the Legislature, involving the suspension of Jonathan Bryan, a member of his Council, from his position, Wright's refusal to sanction the choice of Noble W. Jones as Speaker of the House, and other matters of a like nature, are so well told in the historical works bearing upon that period that no particular notice of such matters will be taken here. Sir James, taking advantage of the lull in the political field, and feeling that he could safely depend upon the loyalty and executive

ability of the oldest member of his Council, James Habersham, applied for a leave of absence which was granted, and he left Georgia on the 10th of July, 1771, for England where he remained until the middle of February, 1773. During his stay in England the king complimented him with a baronetcy.

In the last mentioned year Governor Wright made a full and interesting *Report on the Condition of the Province of Georgia*, in the form of "answers to heads of inquiry in obedience to his Majesty's commands, signified by the Earl of Dartmouth," received September 14th, 1773.

With the year 1774 he began a regular correspondence with Secretary of State Lord Dartmouth, in which he freely expressed his views on the subject of the "proceedings of the Liberty people," and giving a woeful account of the trouble he had in complying with the policy of his government with respect to the measures to keep down the spirit of freedom and independence. On the 24th of August he made use of this language: "As in the time of the Stamp Act, I am to be reflected upon and abused for opposing the licentiousness of the people"; and "In short, at such times as these if a man has resolution and integrity enough to stand forth and attempt to do his duty it's like being set up as a mark to be shot at and raising the resentment of great numbers against him. However, altho' this is very disagreeable, I shall not regard it."

With every succeeding letter he shows more clearly his disappointment at the opposition to the government headed by him, and at times he even deplores the fact that he has to remain and bear the trials to which he was subjected. On the 17th of June, 1775, he wrote: "It gives me much concern * * * that on Thursday the 13th inst. the Liberty folks here assembled in the town of Savannah and put up a liberty tree and a flag, and in the evening paraded about the town I am informed to the number of 300, some say 400. * * * The liberty tree and flag were kept up from Tuesday morning till now and is still flying in contempt and defiance of the Court and all law and government, and which here and else-

where seems now nearly at an end." On the 20th, three days later, he informed the Secretary of the way the North Carolina patriots were acting, in these words: "By the enclosed paper your Lordship will see the extraordinary resolves of the people in Charlotte Town, Mecklenburg County, and I should not be surprised if the same should be done everywhere else."

On the 10th of July of the same year he reported the capture by the Liberty Boys of a quantity of gun powder, and of the seizing of some of his letters, both private and official, and his indignation was so great that he wanted to resign at once and go home. This is what he said: "It being impossible, my Lord, for me to submit to these daily insults, I must again request his Majesty will be graciously pleased to give me leave to return to England. * * * Mr. Habersham is gone to Philadelphia for the recovery of his health, and I begin to think a King's Governor has little or no business here." The next day he reported that six tons of powder had been taken from a ship by the "Liberty Folks," and expressed the hope that some way to end the troubles might be found, thus: "Pray God grant a happy and speedy reconciliation!" A week later he renewed his desire to resign in these words: "I am humbly to request that his Majesty will be graciously pleased to give me leave to return to England in order to resign the government." Once more he seemingly with sincerity gave out the hope that a way to settle the whole question without a resort to arms might be found, saying: "Your Lordship will be the best judge what is most proper to be done, but I beg leave again most heartily to wish that conciliatory measures may speedily take place, or total ruin and destruction will soon follow, and America lost and gone!" And in a postscript he added: "I beg leave to repeat that no correspondence is safe. I dare not venture a single letter by the post to Charles Town for the packet, but under cover as private letters."

He had the most hearty contempt for the younger set of American patriots, known throughout the provinces as "Liberty Boys," and whom he called by various names, and his

letters are filled with disrespectful allusions to them. It is true that they were hot-headed and thoughtless in planning to counteract the measures of the Tories and Loyalists, and they were not particular in the manner of inflicting punishment upon those who were high in office or influential in the community. Those youths were thorns in the side of the Governor, and were especially severe in the treatment of himself and his loyal English followers. He gave a full and dramatic account of their dealings with the Rev. Mr. Haddon Smith, rector of Christ Church, whom they commanded to cease preaching or to preach as they directed, and was consequently so distressed that, in the Governor's words, "on the 25th instant (July, 1775) he left the town and went over into Carolina; the reason given for this, is because he refused to preach a sermon and observe a fast which had been directed by the Continental Congress." The parson, four days later, made affidavit, declaring the facts in the case, and stating that one of his persecutors, Peter Taarling, speaking for a crowd of which he seemed to be the leader, used these words to him: "Sir, from your late conduct in disobeying the orders of the Congress, you are deemed an enemy to America, and, by order of the Committee, we are to inform you that you are to be suffered no longer to officiate in this town." It is scarcely believable, at this length of time since the recording of those incidents, that among those turbulent young fellows who got on the nerves of the Royal Governor, and who were recognized by the good parson as among his unwelcome visitors on that occasion were the honorable George Walton, afterwards a signer of the Declaration of Independence and Governor of Georgia, honorable Edward Telfair, afterwards a member of the Continental Congress and Governor of this State, and Oliver Bowen, afterwards Commodore of whatsoever Georgia had in the way of a navy in the War of the Revolution.

But the loyal Governor had a far more thrilling experience with those Liberty Boys later on than he dreamed of having when he expressed his contempt for them in the early days of which we are writing. He was so overcome with anger at their

conduct that he said to Lord Dartmouth, in a letter on the 7th of August, 1775: "It gives me great concern that every letter I now write to your Lordship is to give you accounts of the very illegal, insolent and dangerous transactions of the Liberty People here." He then recorded the fact that they had set at liberty a man imprisoned by order of the Chief Justice for enlisting men in Georgia for a South Carolina regiment of American patriots, and ended the account with this passage, showing his indignation: "And on the 5th he (the released prisoner) went through the town with a drum, beating up for men, and passed close by the Chief Justice's door; also came very near my house. Unparalleled insolence, my Lord! And this is the situation his Majesty's government is reduced to in the Province of Georgia!" His complaints against the unheeding of his suggestions for relief culminated in a letter of September 23rd, 1775 when his language was that of one in the depths of despair.

At length, the Council of Safety held a meeting on the 12th of January, 1776, and determined to resort to strenuous measures in order to quiet the anger of their implacable enemy. Their purpose was to arrest the Governor and place him in solitary confinement. His home was in St. James Square, where the Telfair Academy of Arts and Sciences now stands. Major Joseph Habersham, who was probably one of the young patriots who had already given the honorable gentleman much annoyance, selected a party of which he was the leader, volunteered to make the arrest the same evening, and, marching to his home just at the time when they knew he was closeted with his Council in a momentous conference, that inexperienced officer walked past the sentinel at the door, entered the Council room, placed his hand on the Governor's shoulder, and said, "Sir James, you are my prisoner!" The act was so sudden, bold and daring that the members of Council, as well as any others who might have been present by invitation, or on business, waited not to see what next would happen, but hastily got out of the house, leaving their surprised leader to make the best terms he could with his captors. He was forced

to make a solemn promise to make no attempt at escape, to refrain from any endeavor to communicate with the officers and troops on the ships at Tybee, and a guard was placed over the premises; but he watched for an opportunity to escape, notwithstanding his promise, and succeeded in doing so on the 11th of February. His friends, by way of excuse, for his non-observance of the oath of parole, circulated reports that he was daily subjected to the insults of the hot-headed patriots, and even that he had been shot at. It is probable that some shots were fired by careless persons through the windows of his house, but it is doubtful whether he was at any time in real danger. He had treated the defenders of American liberty and justice with the greatest disrespect and refused to show them any consideration whatever, and so he was made the victim of their just retaliation. His loyalist friend, John Mullryne, aided him in his escape, and to his place at Bonaventure he made his way, and thence he was taken by a waiting boat and crew to the armed ship Scarborough, lying off Tybee.

He remained on the Scarborough certainly as late as the latter part of March, as, on the 27th of that month, he addressed a letter while on board of her to Lord George Germain, of no particular interest in this sketch. He went from Georgia to Halifax where he arrived, according to his own statement, April 21, 1776. There he did not make a lengthy stay, but proceeded to England, and of his life there we know little.

Of the siege and capture of Savannah by the British forces under Colonel Archibald Campbell, in December, 1778, nothing need be said here. When the result was known in England, Sir James Wright was ordered back to Georgia, and he reached Savannah July 14, 1779. The condition of affairs in the Province at that time was not satisfactory, as by his statement in a letter written on the 31st he said, "I did not find the Province by any means in that state of security which I expected," and on the 9th of August he added, "The more I am able to see into the true state of affairs here the more I am convinced of the wretched situation **the Province** is in."

We have no more letters from him until the 5th of November, after the successful defense of Savannah by the British garrison against the siege of the combined American troops and the French allies. On that day he wrote an account of the affair to Lord George Germain, beginning with this highly exciting statement: "Since I had the honor of writing to your Lordship last * * * we have met with a very unexpected, alarming, and serious scene, especially in this part of the world, for no man could have thought, or believed, that a French fleet of 25 sail of the line, with at least 9 frigates and a number of other vessels, would have come on the coast of Georgia in the month of September, and landed from 4,000 to 5,000 troops to besiege the town of Savannah." After recording the fact that on the 15th (really the 16th) of the month named, Count d'Estaing sent a summons to General Prevost to surrender the town and Province to the *King of France*, he declared that it had been "the unanimous opinion and resolution of the civil and military that the town should be defended," and added that he had harbored "*strong* reasons to apprehend and fear the contrary." It is on record that the strong reasons were only averted by the final decision, after a heated discussion, to take *his* advice and return a negative answer to the Count. While the siege lasted Governor Wright and Lieutenant-Governor John Graham took refuge in a tent, next to Colonel Maitland, outside of the city limits, on the right of the British lines. The Governor made a full report to the Secretary of State of the beginning, progress, and result of the siege.

Pleased with the result of the siege and the departure of the French from Georgia, Governor Wright determined to let the "leaders of rebellion" feel the weight of the heavy hand of British rule upon them. As he said himself, he was determined to "check the spirit of rebellion," and his treatment of all who did not heartily withdraw from their former attitude of resistance to the dominant power was truly oppressive and tyrannical. He wrote to England letters in striking contrast to those of the period when he felt his inability to sub-

due the rising opposition to Great Britain's harsh measures which preceded the Declaration of Independence. He had the power to retaliate, and he exercised it with severity. He strongly objected to the general amnesty offered by Sir Henry Clinton who landed in Georgia in February, 1780, and had an act passed, July 1st, known as the Disqualifying Act, naming 151 prominent republicans as enemies to the king, and disqualifying them from holding any office of honor, trust, or profit in Georgia, "as some kind of punishment to delinquents, and check to rebellion, and indeed for the support of Government." Such was his manner of conduct so long as he saw any evidence of the success of his side in the keeping of Georgia from gaining her freedom and independence; but when his side seemed to be losing ground his letters showed the same spirit of depression and discouragement as when he thought, in the beginning of the trouble, that "ruin and destruction" were impending and "America lost and gone." Relentless in his dealings with those whom he considered enemies to his country, he put up a doleful cry of despair when things did not go as he wished them to go.

When the tide began to turn in favor of the Americans, and he saw the chance of saving Georgia slipping away, his tone became more and more despairing and his spirits more dejected. After the battle of Guilford Court House he quickly communicated to his government the fact which was so gratifying to him: "I have the very great pleasure to congratulate your Lordship on the signal victory obtained by Earl Cornwallis over the rebel army under the command of General Greene near Guilford in North Carolina"; but after the defeat of Cornwallis at Yorktown he whined that "We are at this moment in the utmost danger and distress, and expect every day to have a formidable force against us. * * * And thus your Lordship sees the consequences of not protecting and holding these two Provinces (South Carolina and Georgia). I always dreaded it from the moment Lord Cornwallis went into Virginia, and the cruel 10th article in his

Lordship's capitulation I fear has ruined the King's cause in America, and I need not comment on it. God only knows what will become of us."

As early as the 24th of April, 1781, three weeks after his crowing over the Guilford victory, he had "alarming accounts from Augusta"; on the 1st of May he found "that things are by no means in that peaceable and secure state" that was desired, because of an attack on Augusta which he feared would be disastrous; on the 5th he felt assured that "the rebellion is *not* entirely quelled in South Carolina; far, very far, from it, on the contrary * * * the country people in general are in arms * * * and the communication between this and Charles Town is entirely cut off"; on the 21st "the officer commanding at Galphin's Fort surrendered to the rebels, and * * * Brown was in the greatest distress (at Augusta), and it is not possible for us to give him relief"; on the 11th of June "It gives me the greatest concern to acquaint you of the loss of Augusta by Colonel Brown being reduced to the necessity of capitulating"; and on the 14th of the same month he wound up a letter with this wail: "In short, my Lord, our prospect is wretched, and if we are not relieved in a few days * * * a famine will ensue. The causes of all this distress and misery are most evident, but I shall say no more, but pray God grant us peace."

He had no more doleful news to impart until his information of the 18th of December, when he announced the capitulation of Cornwallis, which has already been quoted. On the 18th of January, 1782, he was grieved at the news that Wayne and St. Clair had joined General Greene "and are not far off," exclaimed "Surely, surely, my Lord, the commanders of the King's forces in America ought to have supported these Southern Provinces," and ended by requesting leave to return to Great Britain "where *possibly* I might have been more useful than by being kept here."

His career as Governor of Georgia was now rapidly closing. On the 23rd of January, five days later than the letter just quoted, he wrote that "We are now confined almost to our

lines round the town, and are expecting a powerful attack every day, and probably a siege, and thus is this most valuable Province ruined, and, I fear, lost for want of that protection and attention which I conceive the loyalty of the inhabitants entitled them to."

February 12th he wrote to Under Secretary William Knox that "this Province will be totally lost unless soon relieved," and in a postscript to the letter made this specific denunciation of one of the highest British officers: "I have this moment received a letter from General Sir H(enry) C(linton)—a trifling answer that a man might be ashamed to write; and thus do the King's Generals conduct everything."

From that time it became more certain every day that Georgia would have to be given up by the supporters of King George, and it is not necessary here to particularize the various steps leading to the evacuation of Savannah by the British troops, which occurred on the 11th of July, 1782, and the departure of Sir James Wright for England. He went from Savannah to Charleston, South Carolina, accompanied by some of his civil and military officers, in the *Princess Caroline*, and from that place he went to England.

He had been placed on the list of those attainted of high treason by act of the republican Assembly of Georgia, passed March 1st, 1778, and his property confiscated. In the year 1783, he was appointed the head of the board of agents of the American Loyalists for prosecuting their claims for compensation, and received for his services and in consideration of his loss of property, estimated to be worth thirty-three thousand pounds, a pension of five hundred pounds a year.

He died in Fludyen street, Westminster, on the 20th of November, 1785, and on the 28th was buried in the north cloister of Westminster Abbey. By his wife who, as already stated, was lost at sea, he had three sons and six daughters, and was succeeded in the baronetcy by his eldest son James, but the succession was continued in the line of his second son, Alexander, who settled in Jamaica.